



Documentation of child neglect: Do assessment tools make a difference?

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ABSTRACT

Background: Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment and has serious consequences for the development of children. Assessing child neglect is challenging because it involves recognizing acts of omission rather than commissions. If situations of neglect are not documented adequately, protective measures may not be taken.

Objective: This study examines the influence of the assessment tool SAT-BL on the documentation of neglect. By including other assessment characteristics in the analysis, we aim to better understand what influences whether child neglect is documented or not in a case.

Participants and setting: Data from 319 assessment case files were analyzed in a case-control study. Case files from six different CPSs were included with assessments starting between 2016 and 2020.

Methods: Information was systematically collected from case files. Logistic regression models were constructed with documented child neglect as the dependent variable.

Results: Results showed that in cases assessed with the SAT-BL tool, neglect was documented significantly more (50 %) than when no tool was used (30.64 %). Regression analysis revealed a nearly four-times higher probability of documenting child neglect when using the assessment tool SAT-BL while controlling for other predictors. Other factors, such as documented risk factors, the number of professionals involved, conducted home visits and proposed child protection orders, also showed significant associations with neglect documentation.

Conclusion: Results of our analysis indicate that using an assessment tool with definitions increases documentation of child neglect. There is a need for definitions and thresholds when assessing child neglect.

1. Introduction

The term “neglect of neglect” has been used for years to describe the fact that neglect receives less attention than other forms of child maltreatment, both in research and in practice (McSherry, 2007; Stoltenborgh et al., 2013). This is despite prevalence studies

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showing that neglect is the most documented form of child maltreatment (Euser et al., 2013; Jud et al., 2021; Sedlak et al., 2010). Moreover, the consequences of neglect are not necessarily less severe than those of other forms of child maltreatment (Norman et al., 2012). Yet there is a lack of generally valid definitions of child neglect in practice and research. Neglect can imply a wide array of behaviors, ranging from physical, medical, and educational neglect to inadequate supervision or protection (Leeb et al., 2008). Nevertheless, few definitions go beyond a general lack of adequate care and protection.

It can be particularly challenging for professionals to assess child neglect because it is characterized by acts of omission rather than active, observable actions, as in the case of child abuse. Therefore, detailed documentation of the child's situation is often necessary to recognize neglect. Nevertheless, in Switzerland, there are neither national standards for assessing child neglect nor official definitions of neglect to rely on. Percentages of reported child maltreatment cases involving neglect range up to 18 % in Switzerland (Jud et al., 2021) – in comparison with other national child protection systems where more than half of the reported cases involved child neglect (for the US, see Sedlak et al., 2010). The fact that neglect has been less prevalently recorded by organizations in the Swiss child protection system suggests an underreporting which may be related to the lack of standardized definitions and procedures. The question arises as to how assessments must be formally carried out so that neglectful situations are adequately documented. In recent years, practitioners and researchers have especially considered specific tools that may improve assessments. Structured assessment tools aim to guide case workers towards more thorough evaluation and documentation by providing information on evidence-based child maltreatment risk factors and often also defining thresholds for neglect. However, assessment tools are still not widely used in Switzerland and are repeatedly criticized for negatively impacting the investigator's social work practice instead of improving it. Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent these tools are useful for assessing neglect as a specific form of child maltreatment.

1.1. The impact of formal assessment characteristics on child neglect assessments

Based on the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), predictors of child maltreatment and child protection outcomes can be located on different levels (Baumann et al., 2005). Existing literature indicates the strongest correlations between parent- and family-related risk factors and neglect, alongside child risk factors (Mulder et al., 2018; Schumacher et al., 2001; Younas & Gutman, 2022). Furthermore, factors on the level of the organization and external factors (e.g. factors of the community) influence the occurrence, but also the processes of documenting, recognizing, and reporting child maltreatment; but these factors have been less studied (Coulton et al., 1999; Smith et al., 2017).

For child neglect, studies show great variance in how child protection services (CPS) carry out assessments, depending on the national and organizational context; these findings are accompanied by a debate on “good practice” in the assessment of neglect (e.g. Horwath, 2005; Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2014). However, to date and to our best knowledge, there are no studies that examine certain important formal assessment characteristics, such as the time resources that social workers invest depending on the case or the amount of written information that is produced and considered in assessments of child neglect.

The existing literature on formal assessment characteristics emphasizes the importance of cooperation between professionals in the assessment of child maltreatment. Munro (1999) shows in her study of child maltreatment inquiry reports in the UK that in several cases, fatal instances of child maltreatment could have been prevented if information from other professionals had been obtained in addition to the investigators' information. Reports and research findings indicate that cooperation between professionals is increasing (Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2015), including in the assessment of neglect (Horwath, 2005). Having a closer look at the contact between investigators and families, it becomes clear that the investigators usually contact the family (Horwath, 2005). Holland (2000) shows that the child protection assessments she examined relied primarily on verbal interactions between parents and social workers. However, home visits are particularly emphasized to be crucial to recognize cases of child neglect (Holland, 2000; Laird et al., 2017; Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2014), as they allow for direct observation of the interaction between parents and children, as well as the parents' risk factors (Casey & Hackett, 2021). At the same time, home visits focus on the household members. This exacerbates the problem that caregivers outside of the household, such as separated fathers, are already less contacted by professionals than household members (Laird et al., 2017). The Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (2014) notes that assessments tended to be more complete if the assessments were written for the purpose of intervention following the assessment.

1.2. The impact of assessment tools on child neglect assessments

Despite international progress in the development of assessment tools, the use of such tools remains relatively rare in Switzerland. Critics of assessment tools argue that the tools restrict the professional discretion of social workers and weaken the specialized knowledge and intuition of front-line workers (Gillingham, 2011; Høybye-Mortensen, 2015). Furthermore, opponents express concerns about the potential illusory certainty that these tools may provide, which could obscure the uncertain nature of future forecasts and the moral considerations inherent in child protection decisions (Broadhurst et al., 2010). In our study, we examine the impact of the tool SAT-BL (SAT-BL – Standardised assessment tool Bern/Lucerne, Hauri et al., 2021; for an English overview of the concept and structure of SAT-BL, see Lätsch et al., 2021). This assessment tool could be categorized as a structured professional judgment tool (SPJ). SPJ tools structure the assessment with an evidence-based set of risk factors, but the professionals decide on their own and are not statistically guided (De Bortoli et al., 2017).

The results are mixed as to whether the tools can be used to better document information. A study by de Kwaadsteniet et al. (2013) showed that situations were more fully documented with the ORBA method, used in the Netherlands since 2006, including risk factors and protective factors. The assessment process was also documented more transparently and included a plan for the assessment and

traceable conclusions. Still, certain aspects, like the duration and frequency of child maltreatment or the conclusion of whether a child was indeed maltreated, were also absent in cases assessed with ORBA. Léveillé and Chamberland (2010) found that the “British Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (FACNF)” led to more holistic and structured assessments and better analysis of situations, although the framework was not always filled out in detail and, therefore, lacked certain information. These assessment tools have not yet been specifically studied for child neglect, which may require different assessment approaches due to the unique characteristics of neglect as opposed to active forms of child maltreatment.

The existing research on assessment characteristics and the risk and protective factors related to child neglect mainly originates from English-speaking countries. Gilbert (2012) has pointed out that the USA and other English-speaking countries tend to have significantly different approaches to child maltreatment policies than continental European countries, impacting child protection systems and practices. Therefore, it's crucial to consider Switzerland's legal and political framework when examining assessments in this context.

1.3. Swiss context

The Swiss Civil Code (SCivC), embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, provides the legal framework for child protection in Switzerland. However, each of Switzerland's 26 cantons (states) is responsible for designing its child protection structures, which are regulated by cantonal laws (Jud & Knüsel, 2019). This results in 26 different child protection implementations, depending on cantonal regulations. The Swiss Civil Code sets the overall framework and requirements.

Since 2013, the Swiss Civil Code demands professional, specialized authorities to take child protection measures when a child's well-being is at risk. These child protection authorities (CPA) differ in whether they are structured as courts or administrative authorities, on which level (cantonal, regional, or communal) they are organized, as well as their catchment areas ranging from areas with under 20,000 inhabitants to nearly 400,000 (Konferenz für Kindes- und Erwachsenenschutz, 2020).

Following a report from private individuals or professionals that a child's welfare is at risk, the CPA decides whether an in-depth assessment is required. About half of the CPAs carry out assessments themselves, while the other half delegate them to either general social services or services specialized in risk assessment (Jud & Knüsel, 2019; Rieder et al., 2016). There is no clear evidence on how the individual authorities and services formally conduct their assessments, what information they gather and how they document the information in the case files (Lätsch, 2012). It can be assumed that there is a wide variation due to a lack of standardization between the organizations. Moreover, whether and with which assessment tools the organizations work has not been mapped. In Switzerland, several assessment instruments are used, both to guide the methodological procedure and to structure the assessment (cf., Biesel et al., 2017). The SAT-BL is the only tool that structures the assessment based on evidence-informed risk and protective factors. Two of the authors of this paper were involved in the construction process of the tool.

After finalizing the assessment, the services assigned with the task submit an assessment report about the family situation and substantiation of alleged incidents of child maltreatment to the CPA with recommendations on how to protect the child and support its family. The CPA then decides whether to enact mandatory child protection orders or not. Notably, there is no legal requirement to substantiate specific types of child maltreatment; the Swiss Civil Code only operates with the broad legal term “child endangerment”.

1.4. Aims

This study examines how formal assessment characteristics affect the documentation of child neglect, focusing specifically on the impact of an SPJ assessment tool. We investigate whether specific assessment characteristics result in a higher likelihood of child neglect being documented in the case file. Since assessment tools are often discussed as a factor in improving assessments but are nevertheless rarely used in Switzerland, we focus on their influence. Our analysis is based on systematically gathered data from assessment case files, providing valuable insights into the assessment process.

2. Methods

This analysis is based on data from the research project «The impact of standardized tools on child protection assessment », which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant No. 10001A_169445). The project examined the implementation and impact of the newly developed assessment tool SAT-BL, implemented by various organizations in German-speaking Switzerland. Divided into three project parts, it investigated, first, the impact of the tool on child protection decisions (case records), second, the impact of the tool on children and caregivers (survey among children and parents) and, third, the professional handling of the instrument and its impact on procedures and attitudes (ethnographic observations). For this analysis, data from the first part of the project, generated from case records, is used. The project is based on a pretest-posttest design, comparing cases before and after the organizations implemented the tool with a control group that did not use the tool at all.

The study design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the canton of Bern, representing the umbrella organization Swissethics and the responsible cantonal data protection officer. Child protection agreements were signed with each child protection authority.

2.1. Sample

A total of six CPAs were included in the study sample. All CPAs outsourced their assessments to CPSs, which were either organizations specialized in child protection assessments or polyvalent organizations assigned with child protection assessments alongside

other services for families. Two out of the six CPSs implemented the SAT-BL assessment tool. One organization in the original intervention group only sporadically used parts of the tool, so the organization had to be categorized as part of the control group. This resulted in four organizations forming the control group that did not implement the tool or used it only sporadically. To ensure comparability, the organizations in the treatment group and the control group were matched in pairs based on their type (specialized or polyvalent agencies) and the size of the catchment area, choosing the same reference period for the two matched organizations. Overall, survey data consist of cases where the assessments started between 2016 and 2020.

Following a pre-time/post-time approach, for all organizations in the intervention group, cases from one year before and one year after the implementation of the tool were analyzed. Similarly, for organizations in the control group, cases from two years during similar time periods were analyzed. In organizations of the intervention and the control group with a caseload of more than 40 cases over the two years, 40 cases were randomly selected for reasons of feasibility. The organizations either selected the case records according to the study design criteria or provided a list of their case files from which the study team selected the case records.

The total sample consists of 633 children (cases) from 414 families. For this analysis, one child per family was randomly selected as assessments were not carried out separately for siblings, and in most cases, no separate final reports were prepared when assessments were carried out for several children from a family. Due to the focus on child neglect cases, we included only cases of documented child neglect (for more details, see the information on the dependent variable in the next section) or cases with no documented form of child maltreatment. These unspecific situations of children at risk lack (sufficient) documentation of incidents to justify labeling them as (a type of) child maltreatment. Eight cases had to be excluded due to missings in the independent variables. This resulted in a sample of $n = 319$ children.

2.2. Measures

The dependent variable *documentation of neglect* is binary coded to differentiate between cases where child neglect was documented in a case file and those where it was not documented (Table 1). It was not decisive whether the case workers explicitly labelled child neglect in their recommendation to the authority but whether incidents documented in the file met the thresholds for coding child neglect. In consequence, the case workers may have used the label child neglect in cases where we did not find enough information to conclude that thresholds were met, or they may not have used the label in cases where we did find enough information to confirm thresholds. The study coders relied on the evidence-informed thresholds for neglect as given by the SAT-BL tool: the insufficient fulfillment of physical and emotional needs, or the lack of adequate development opportunities, for example, if (pre-) school education is made impossible or if overprotection takes place that impairs the child's development. Furthermore, the SAT-BL definition includes the lack of consistency in childcare, for example, frequent changes between carers or repeated unplanned changes in care. Finally, the definition also includes insufficient protection of the child (for more information on the definition, cf. Hauri et al., 2021). Neglect can occur even in the absence of conscious intention. It encompasses situations of actual harm as well as potential harm (cf. Leeb et al.,

Table 1
Descriptives for dependent and independent variables.

Variable	Description	% missing	n
Documentation of child neglect	Child neglect documented	0	Total sample ($n = 106/327$) 32.42 % With SAT-BL ($n = 15/30$) 50 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 91/297$) 30.64 %
Child age ^a	Age above median (median = 11.07)	0	Total sample ($n = 169/327$) 51.68 % With SAT-BL ($n = 15/30$) 50 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 154/297$) 51.85 %
Child gender	Female	0.31	Total sample ($n = 139/326$) 42.64 % With SAT-BL ($n = 16/30$) 53.33 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 123/296$) 41.55 %
Risk factors ^a	Number of documented risk factors above median (median = 1)	0	Total sample ($n = 178/327$) 54.43 % With SAT-BL ($n = 15/30$) 50 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 163/297$) 54.88 %
Welfare aid	One or both parents receive welfare aid	0	Total sample ($n = 96/327$) 29.36 % With SAT-BL ($n = 10/30$) 33.33 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 86/297$) 28.96 %
Professionals involved ^a	Number of professionals involved above median (median = 4)	0	Total sample ($n = 207/327$) 63.30 % With SAT-BL ($n = 17/30$) 56.67 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 190/297$) 63.97 %
Home visits	Home visits conducted	0	Total sample ($n = 202/327$) 61.77 % With SAT-BL ($n = 22/30$) 73.33 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 180/297$) 60.61 %
Proposed child protection order	Investigator proposed a child protection order	2.45	Total sample ($n = 120/319$) 37.62 % With SAT-BL ($n = 11/30$) 36.67 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 109/289$) 37.72 %
Data collection period (pre)	Case from pre-time period	0	Total sample ($n = 173/327$) 52.91 % With SAT-BL ($n = 0/30$) 0 % Without SAT-BL ($n = 173/297$) 58.25 %

^a Variable dichotomized based on a median split.

2008).

To determine whether child neglect is present or not, the SAT-BL provides no thresholds in the sense of cut-off scores but detailed anchor examples with specific situational characteristics described for different age groups. For instance, concerning the sleep situation, for children aged 0 to 2 years, neglect may be given if the child is at risk of falling, if it is exposed to noise during sleep, if there are repeated activities outside the home at night, if the sleeping area is dirty and unhygienic, or if there are hazardous air conditions in the bedroom (e.g. due to smoking). The definitions and anchor examples were derived from existing scientific literature and are a synthesis of various scientific studies. The variable also includes cases where neglect is documented combined with other forms of child maltreatment.

As independent variables, a variable was included indicating whether the *assessment tool* SAT-BL was used or not. The SAT-BL tool follows the 'structured professional judgment' approach (De Bortoli et al., 2017). It structures the assessment into various characteristics that are to be assessed. Investigators using the tool collect information on specific indicators of a certain characteristic. The tool also requires integrating the information into an overall evaluation of the child's well-being and prospects and making a proposition of whether a child protection order is necessary. It is important to note that in the organizations that implemented the tool, not all professionals have ultimately used the tool for all of their assessments (cf. Lätsch et al., 2021). The variable indicates whether the tool was used for the specific case. If a case is assessed without the tool, even though the organization implemented it, we assumed that the tool was not used. As described above, not all organizations implemented the tool as planned. In the end, 30 of the cases included in this study were assessed with the tool and 297 cases were assessed without the tool.

As child characteristics, *child gender* was binary coded with female and male. Median splits were performed for better interpretability of the continuous variable *age of the child*. *Risk factors* as an assessment characteristic indicate how many child neglect risk factors are documented in a case record. Median splits were also conducted (Table 1). While there is an overlap between the risk factors for child neglect and the ones for child abuse, each form of child maltreatment has its own distinct set of risk factors (Younas & Gutman, 2022). No distinction was made between the absence of a risk factor in a case and the lack of documentation about it. This is because investigators typically only note the presence of a risk factor, not its absence. Risk factors that were included in this study are low parental educational level, young age of the parent, parental substance abuse, current or past parental mental/psychiatric problems, and the parents having experienced child maltreatment themselves in their childhood (Schumacher et al., 2001; Younas & Gutman, 2022). Furthermore, we considered the risk factor of children's developmental and behavioral problems (Mulder et al., 2018), whereas it is not possible to say unequivocally whether the problems are the cause or consequence of child neglect (Schumacher et al., 2001). Also, we included the risk factor of poly-victimization, indicated by the fact that a child was the victim not only of child neglect but also of another form of child maltreatment (for more information on poly-victimization, cf. e.g. Finkelhor et al., 2007). The risk factor of *monetary welfare aid* is important and, therefore, analyzed separately. The variable is present if one or both parents receive welfare aid or their financial situation would entitle them to claim it. The variable is a proxy for poverty because detailed information about the family's financial situation was often missing in the case files. Indicators of poverty are considered particularly relevant child neglect risk factors in the scientific literature. Families affected by poverty are more likely to experience other forms of child maltreatment as well, but neglect is particularly associated with poverty (Pelton, 2015; Sedlak et al., 2010). While the scientific literature also contains other risk factors, this selection was made based on the available information in the case files. Considering the meta-analysis by Mulder et al. (2018), the included factors are among the ones that show the biggest effect sizes, but information on other important risk factors like prenatal problems of the mother or the child and a variable indicating if the child is not living with two biological parents could not be included. Furthermore, we could not include protective factors, although the (perception) of social support, in particular, emerges as a protective factor in literature (Younas & Gutman, 2022) due to a lack of information in the case files.

Based on the theory of Decision-Making Ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), it is crucial to consider organizational factors along with individual factors of the families when analyzing assessments of child neglect. The variable *professionals involved* indicates the number of professionals from the fields of justice, police, administration, education, and social services with whom the investigator was in contact during the assessment, in writing, by telephone or in person (Table 1). The question is whether a higher number of professionals involved during the assessment leads to better documentation of neglect, as different professionals can bring different perspectives on the family situation. The binary variable *home visits* was included to indicate whether the investigator conducted (announced or unannounced) home visits. Another variable was included indicating if the investigator *proposed a child protection order*, taking into account the study of the Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (2014), which found that child protection authorities carry out more thorough assessments when they plan to propose interventions as a result of the assessment. In Switzerland, child protection authorities make the final decisions on child protection orders proposed by the investigator. The data showed that the investigator's proposal is often confirmed. It was, therefore, decided not to include a variable for the order enacted but only for the order proposed by the investigator. Child protection orders range from mandatory directives for care, education or training to guardianship to the withdrawal of custody or custodial rights. A further variable that identifies the *data collection period* was included, indicating if the case was from the pre-time period (before implementing the tool) or the post-time period (after the implementation of the tool). This variable helps control for external factors, such as political or social changes, that may have influenced assessments during the data collection period.

2.3. Procedures

A coding system was developed and pre-tested with two organizations. The coding system was based on the SAT-BL and included characteristics of the child, the family, the care situation, the assessment, and the child protection measures. After revising the coding

scheme, coders received training, reliability checks were carried out, and where there were discrepancies between the senior coder and the other coders, the cases were discussed, and the coding system was revised as necessary. To ensure data security, the data was collected on-site at the organizations. Depending on the organization, the case files were available electronically, physically, or in combination. In regular meetings of the coders with the senior coder, individual case files and variable operationalization were further discussed.

All written information associated with the assessments was examined. Firstly, the file notes: while in some organizations all conversations and telephone calls were written down in detail, only a few notes were available in other case files. Secondly, documents used during the assessment to clarify the facts of the case, such as medical reports, photos, or school reports. Thirdly, assessment documents like the decision on the child protection order, the assessment report, or the decision of the child and adult protection authority were analyzed.

2.4. Data analysis

For better interpretability, all variables were dichotomized. For continuous variables, median splits were performed, dichotomizing data at the median. The use of median splits is controversial in discussion because the procedure may reduce the power of statistical models (e.g. Maxwell & Delaney, 1993). As a condition for using median splits we refer to Iacobucci et al. (2015) suggesting independent variables are uncorrelated. Our model was tested for multicollinearity, showing no problematic results (all correlations between predictors were smaller than 0.3 and all VIF values were smaller than 2).

A regression analysis was carried out to test the hypothesis that using an assessment tool leads to neglect being documented more frequently. Documentation of child neglect is the examined dependent variable, and the use of the SAT-BL tool is the independent variable, controlling for various child and assessment characteristics. For this regression analysis, multilevel models would have been adequate because the individual cases are nested in organizations, but due to the small number of organizations, a multilevel analysis with organizations as cluster units was not feasible. Logistic regression models were instead calculated with cluster-robust standard errors, to ensure unbiased standard errors under these circumstances. Because not all assessments of the intervention group were conducted with SAT-BL, we conducted a separate analysis where we swapped the variable indicating if the individual case has been assessed with the tool with a variable indicating if the organization has fully implemented the tool in their procedures. The results of this additional analysis differed only slightly from our main analysis (see Appendix A), indicating that either if a case is assessed with the tool or if the organization as such implemented the tool, both have a similar impact on the documentation of child neglect. All analyses were generated using Stata/SE 16.0 (Stata Corp., 2019).

3. Results

A first exploration of the data shows a significant difference in the number of cases with documented child neglect between cases that were assessed with and those that were assessed without the assessment tool ($\chi^2(1) = 4.66, p = 0.03, n = 327$). When using no assessment tool, neglect is documented in only 30.64 % of cases, compared to 50 % of cases where an assessment tool was used. This difference between cases that are assessed with and without the tool supports the focus of the chosen regression analysis. The focus of the regression analysis on the documentation of child neglect is furthermore supported by the fact that the difference between cases assessed with the tool and without the tool is not as apparent in the documentation of cases of other forms of maltreatment. An analysis of cases excluded from the study sample, where another form of child maltreatment but not neglect was present, shows that in 28.22 % of cases, child maltreatment is documented when no assessment tool was used, in comparison with 28.57 % when the SAT-BL was used ($\chi^2(1) = 0.00, p = 0.97, n = 308$).

The results (Table 2) indicate nearly four-time increased odds for documented child neglect under the condition of SAT-BL while controlling for other predictors (OR = 3.84, $p = 0.01$, 95 % CI: 1.47, 10.04). The controlled-for-child characteristics show no significant association with documented neglect, neither the child's age nor the child's gender. Some of the controlled assessment characteristics showed significant associations with the dependent variable while controlling for other predictors. The documentation of child neglect became more probable when more child neglect risk factors were present (OR = 2.75, $p = 0.00$, 95 % CI: 1.57, 4.82). The number of

Table 2
Multiple logistic regression for the documentation of child neglect using cluster-robust standard errors.

Documentation of neglect	OR	SE	p	95 % CI	
Assessment tool SAT-BL	3.84	1.88	0.01	1.47	10.04
Child age ^a	1.21	0.34	0.50	0.70	2.09
Child gender	0.81	0.22	0.43	0.47	1.38
Risk factors ^a	2.75	0.79	0.00	1.57	4.82
Welfare aid	0.84	0.26	0.59	0.46	1.55
Professionals involved ^a	2.74	0.88	0.00	1.46	5.15
Home visits	1.85	0.56	0.04	1.02	3.35
Proposed child protection order	4.02	1.12	0.00	2.32	6.95
Data collection period (pre)	0.67	0.21	0.19	0.37	1.22

N = 319.

^a Variable dichotomized based on a median split.

professionals involved in the case also shows a positive association with the documentation of child neglect (OR = 2.74, $p = 0.00$, 95 % CI: 1.46, 5.15). Furthermore, the conduction of home visits shows a positive association with child neglect documentation (OR = 1.85, $p = 0.04$, 95 % CI: 1.02, 3.35). Results also show a positive association between the proposition of child protection orders and the documentation of child neglect (OR = 4.02, $p = 0.00$, 95 % CI: 2.32, 6.95). No significant associations with the dependent variable were found with cases where the family receives monetary welfare aid, and with the period of data collection.

To examine the correlations between the dependent and independent variables without controlling for the other predictors, a correlation matrix was created (see [Appendix B](#)), which is in line with the associations from the regression analysis.

Having identified the use of an assessment tool as being associated with the documentation of child neglect, further descriptive analyses were conducted (illustrated in [Fig. 1](#)), showing whether assessments conducted with and without the SAT-BL tool also differed in relevant assessment characteristics. Results show major differences of over 10 % between cases assessed with and without the SAT-BL tool for various assessment characteristics. For cases of documented neglect, results showed that when using the SAT-BL, fewer risk factors were documented (66.67 % vs. 74.73 %), fewer families were receiving monetary welfare aid (20 % vs. 31.87 %), and investigators had less contact with professionals (73.33 % vs. 82.42 %). For cases with no documented neglect, results showed that when using the SAT-BL, fewer risk factors were documented (33.33 % vs. 46.12 %), more families were receiving monetary welfare aid (46.67 % vs. 27.67 %), investigators had less contact with professionals (40 % vs. 55.83 %), more home visits were carried out (73.33 % vs. 56.31 %), and fewer child protection orders were proposed (13.33 % vs. 25.73 %). The Pearson chi-squared test revealed no significant results, so the findings must be interpreted as exploratory.

4. Discussion

In 50 % of cases assessed with the SAT-BL assessment tool, external coders indicated that child neglect was documented in a case record, compared to only 30.64 % of cases assessed without the tool. Based on this result, we conducted a regression analysis to examine whether using the SAT-BL tool leads to more documentation of child neglect. The results indicate a nearly four-times higher probability of documenting child neglect when using the assessment tool SAT-BL while controlling for other predictors. Some control variables were positively correlated with the documentation of neglect: The number of child neglect risk factors, the number of professionals involved, the conduction of home visits and the proposition of a child protection order also predict child neglect besides the use of the SAT-BL. An additional descriptive analysis showed no clear evidence that using the SAT-BL tool changes assessment characteristics in a specific direction.

Having clear definitions and thresholds is crucial when it comes to identifying neglect in comparison to other forms of child



Fig. 1. Assessment characteristics by type of child maltreatment for cases assessed with and without the SAT-BL tool.

Note: Documented neglect also includes cases in which neglect and other forms of child maltreatment are documented.

All variables dichotomized. Median splits for risk factors, professionals involved.

Documentation of neglect (n = 106): With SAT-BL (n = 15), without SAT-BL (n = 91).

No documentation of maltreatment (n = 221): With SAT-BL (n = 15), without SAT-BL (n = 206).

maltreatment because neglect as an omission can be particularly hard to recognize, and neglectful incidents might be perceived as (other) types of poor parenting. In Switzerland, child protection organizations often lack clear definitions of child neglect or thresholds for neglect if they do not work with an assessment tool (cf. Jud & Knüsel, 2019). The correlation between the use of the tool and the documentation of neglect might be attributed to the fact that explicit definitions and operationalized anchors were possibly only introduced and implemented by organizations alongside the implementation of the tool. It is important to note that the coders in our study used the same definitions as the professionals who worked with the tool. Improved documentation of child neglect when using SAT-BL concurs the aims of implementing a structured assessment tool: Providing anchors for thresholds of child neglect aims to guide case workers towards a more thorough evaluation and documentation of an item and should consequently lead to child neglect being less likely overlooked (for the risk of concurrently increased false-positives, see Lyon, 2023). Furthermore, it must be considered that more documentation does not necessarily correspond with better documentation, and the quality of documentation would have to be examined separately.

The importance of information not only remembered by investigators but also accurately recorded is shown in the study by Munro (1999), which illustrates that investigators' memories in child protection cases are limited and prone to error. Therefore, it is important not only to collect sufficient and detailed information about the family situation to recognize neglect but also to document this information in detail. SPJ assessment tools help structure assessments thematically and require written descriptions of specific topics, resulting in more comprehensive information recording, as the studies of de Kwaadsteniet et al. (2013) and Léveillé and Chamberland (2010) show, which identify more complete assessments in cases of child maltreatment when using an SPJ assessment tool. However, the findings of de Kwaadsteniet et al. (2013) also indicate a lack of documentation on the frequency and duration of maltreatment situations despite information on the nature of child maltreatment being often available. For cases of child neglect, it's crucial to have information about the frequency and duration to identify neglect due to the specific harm caused by continuity. In their meta-evaluation, Léveillé and Chamberland (2010) found that more information about the child, the family, and the environment was collected through an SPJ assessment tool but less background referral information. Specific information on the child, the family, and the environment is probably more likely to contain information about child neglect than other referral information. Therefore, focusing on this information and deliberately omitting other information is reasonable.

In our regression analysis, we controlled for various assessment characteristics. Some of these assessment characteristics showed significant correlations with the documentation of child neglect. As expected, a higher number of child neglect risk factors increased the chance of documentation of child neglect, as neglect is more likely to be present in families with more risk factors. Contrary to our expectations, we found no relationship between a family relying on monetary welfare aid and the documentation of child neglect. Even though welfare aid as a poverty indicator is an important child neglect risk factor, it is possible that state support, which often includes a counseling component in addition to financial benefits, provides a certain degree of protection for families from child neglect. Another explanation could be that investigators primarily view poverty as the main issue in supported families. Instead of viewing child neglect from the perspective of the child, independent of the parents' capacities, professionals might be reluctant to label a child in need in a situation of poverty as neglected as they might view the situation from a parent's perspective and might want to avoid blaming (cf. Morris et al., 2018).

Furthermore, results of the regression analysis show that the more professionals were involved, the more child neglect was documented, although causality here is unclear: Is neglect more often documented because of increased professional attention, or are more professionals consulted due to the worrying neglectful situation? There is no doubt that the involvement of different professionals is crucial in recognizing neglect (Munro, 1999) and there is also evidence that the views of different professionals are increasingly being sought in assessments of neglect (Horwath, 2005; Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2015). The regression analysis furthermore reveals a positive correlation between cases of documented child neglect and cases in which home visits were conducted. But also here it is unclear what causes the result: If more home visits were conducted in cases of child neglect because investigators wanted to investigate neglect cases in more depth, or if neglect was more detected because home visits were conducted. Home visits are required to observe everyday interactions to identify neglect (Holland, 2000; Laird et al., 2017; Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2014). In Switzerland not every report of possible maltreatment is followed by a home visit (Steffen & Koch, 2024). This is not necessarily due to more lenient standards. A substantial part of the cases will already have received voluntary support from the same service that provides the assessment, so the investigators will partly use existing file entries. Moreover, assessments of reports on neglect of adolescents will more likely be based on interviews with the victims at the premises of the services.

The relationship between proposed child protection orders and the documentation of child neglect also raises questions about cause and effect. When neglect is documented, it is expected that more child protection orders are proposed compared to situations where no child maltreatment is documented. At the same time, the intention to propose an intervention can lead to more thorough assessments of family situations (Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills, 2014). The possibility of an objection may lead to greater attention being paid to legal safeguards and more comprehensive documentation when a child protection order is proposed than when it is not. In line with previous studies, we found no significant associations between documenting child neglect and children's age and gender (Mulder et al., 2018). We also have found no significant associations for the predictor data collection period, suggesting no cohort effects during data collection.

After identifying the impact of the SAT-BL tool on the documentation of child neglect in the regression analysis, we conducted a descriptive analysis to explore whether the use of an assessment tool changes not only the documentation of child neglect but also assessment characteristics such as documented risk factors, professionals involved, home visits, and proposed child protection orders. Our analysis revealed differences in various assessment characteristics between cases assessed by the SAT-BL tool and those assessed without it. While our analysis revealed differences in the assessment characteristics between cases assessed by the SAT-BL tool and

those assessed without it, those differences showed no clear patterns and the Pearson chi-squared test results were not significant. The existing literature shows a positive impact of implementing SPJ instruments on the documentation of risk assessment elements (de Kwaadsteniet et al., 2013). Moreover, Léveillé and Chamberland (2010) found that interprofessional collaboration and participation of children and parents increased with the introduction of an SPJ instrument. Based on this literature, we would have expected significant results showing that more professionals are involved, more home visits are conducted and more risk factors are documented when using the SAT-BL tool. However, our analyses could not replicate these advantages of SPJ instruments from previous literature.

This study is the first in Switzerland to analyze the use of an assessment tool for child neglect assessments in a case-control study. However, it has a few limitations. First, our model only explains part of the variance in the dependent variable, suggesting that important explanatory variables are missing. The existing literature on neglect and its documentation is scarce, making it difficult to identify the factors that influence the documentation of neglect. Limitations were furthermore imposed by the quality and nature of the data. For example, we could not take into account variables related to the child's broader social environment, such as neighborhoods or cantons, due to data protection and sample size limitations. We also couldn't consider other variables, such as the duration of the assessment, because it hardly varied, likely due to adherence to issued guidelines by an umbrella organization. Secondly, for most assessment characteristics, it is not possible to theoretically derive causality between them and the documentation of neglect. While the use of an assessment tool can influence the documentation of neglect but not vice versa, causality is not unambiguous for the other assessment characteristics, making it difficult to interpret the results of the control variables. Third, to ensure interrater reliability, all coders received training, and coders collected case files with the senior coder until there was broad agreement. However, we could not calculate interrater agreement between the different coders, which would have exceeded our project's resources because many coders were involved, and case files contained up to 100 documents and in some cases even more. Fourth, our statistical analyses were partly limited by the structure of our data. While a multi-level analysis would have been appropriate due to the nested nature of the data, the small number of organizations and low variance within families limited our ability to analyze the data this way. Furthermore, statistical power was affected by the small number of assessments carried out using the SAT-BL tool. We addressed these limitations by making the statistical model as lean as possible, using robust standard errors, and selecting one child per family for analysis. The limited sample possibly impacted the descriptive analyses' results, showing relevant but not significant differences.

5. Conclusion

In our study, we investigated the relationship between the use of an assessment tool and the documentation of child neglect. Neglect differs from other forms of child maltreatment because it involves omission rather than active maltreatment. However, neglect is often not studied separately. Our study focuses exclusively on neglect and the process of its documentation, which is a crucial step in addressing this form of child maltreatment. Unlike other forms of maltreatment, neglect is often related to a specific living and care situation that persists over time (Stone, 2003), which is why detailed documentation of the child's living situation is essential for identifying neglect.

The results of our analysis indicate that using an SPJ assessment tool significantly increases the chances that child neglect is documented. Conversely, if no tool is used, neglect may go undocumented even when present. Investigators may be aware of the child's living situation but fail to document it adequately, although written documentation is particularly important to reduce errors (Munro, 1999). SPJ assessment tools not only structure the assessment and decision-making process but also specify definitions and often thresholds that contain empirically derived characteristics and risk factors for which investigators should document information. Our results emphasize the importance of such clear definitions and thresholds for documentation. Therefore, it is important to establish uniform definitions and knowledge of empirically derived risk factors and to set quality standards at the organizational or, ideally, at the regional or national level. Also in research, explicit definitions are necessary so that reliable research results emerge, which can provide guidance for policy-makers (cf. Gautschi & Lätsch, 2024). Bearing in mind that neglect has consequences just as serious as active forms of child maltreatment (Norman et al., 2012), it should be a shared goal of research, practice, and policy to treat neglect in its own right and based on explicit definitions to assess, prevent and intervene in cases of child neglect adequately.

Understanding why assessments are conducted in a certain way is crucial to provide critical evidence to develop best practice recommendations. Our descriptive analysis showed no clear evidence that the use of a specific assessment tool influenced formal assessment characteristics. Moderation effects might have been in place. Future research should deepen the understanding of formal assessment characteristics and further investigate their influencing factors. Further research is also required to address the question of to what extent assessment tools not only lead to better documentation of child neglect but also to adequate recognition, appropriate measures, and better long-term outcomes and to examine the link between documentation, recognition, and outcomes in the field of child neglect.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Rahel Portmann: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Simon Kaiser:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Julia Quehenberger:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation. **David Lätsch:** Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Andreas Jud:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Grammarly AI Writing Assistance in order to revise the draft linguistically and grammatically. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendix A. Multiple logistic regression for the documentation of child neglect using cluster-robust standard errors

Documentation of child neglect	OR	SE	p	95 % CI	
Assessment tool SAT-BL implemented	3.04	1.32	0.01	1.30	7.11
Child age ^a	1.30	0.37	0.35	0.75	2.25
Child gender	0.80	0.22	0.43	0.47	1.38
Risk factors ^a	2.69	0.76	0.00	1.54	4.69
Welfare aid	0.85	0.26	0.59	0.46	1.56
Professionals involved	2.76	0.89	0.00	1.47	5.18
Home visits	1.84	0.56	0.05	1.02	3.33
Proposed child protection order	3.85	1.06	0.00	2.24	6.62
Data collection period (pre)	0.61	0.20	0.13	0.32	1.16

N = 319.

^a Variable dichotomized based on a median split.

Appendix B. Correlation coefficients (phi-coefficients) for the dependent and independent variables

	Doc. of neglect	SAT-BL	Child age ^a	Child gender	Risk factors ^a	Welfare aid	Professionals involved ^a	Home visits	Prop. order	Period
Documentation of neglect	1									
Assessment tool SAT-BL	0.12	1								
Child age ^a	0.02	0.01	1							
Child gender	0.06	0.07	0.01	1						
Risk factors ^a	0.27	0.03	0.01	0.1	1					
Welfare aid	0.01	0.03	0.2	0.01	0.09	1				
Professionals involved ^a	0.26	0.04	0.01	0	0.16	0.09	1			
Home visits	0.13	0.08	0.17	0.07	0.03	0.13	0.04	1		
Proposed child protection order	0.36	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.2	0.01	0.2	0.08	1	
Data collection period (pre)	0.01	0.34	0.11	0.02	0	0.06	0.11	0.15	0.01	1

N = 327.

^a Variable dichotomized based on a median split.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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